

Employee Retention

Executive Leadership

BY: Michael D. Jackson
Assistant Fire Chief
Department of the Air Force
Mercury NV

An applied research paper submitted to the National Fire Academy
as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program
March 1999

ABSTRACT

Over the last five years (1993-1998), twenty-one members of the Range Complex Fire Department (RCFD) have left for various reasons. The problem is that because of a reduced personnel budget the department has not been allowed to replace all of the members that have left. The ensuing reduction in staffing has resulted in a fire station closure and a reduction in customer service. Operationally this reduction has resulted in increased response times, reductions of vehicle staffing and increases in overtime.

The purpose of this paper was to identify why personnel were leaving the department and to suggest ways to improve employee retention.

Descriptive and evaluative research methods were utilized to answer the following research questions:

1. Why have members left the Range Complex Fire Department?
2. In general, why do employees leave the fire organizations they work for?
3. What does the upper management team of the RCFD believe are the reasons personnel are leaving the department?
4. What retention programs are used by other federal fire departments?

To identify why employees were leaving the RCFD nine interviews were conducted with former employees that had left the department in the last five years. A literature review was conducted to locate information on why employees leave organizations. Seven interviews were conducted with the upper management team of the RCFD to find out why they believed personnel were leaving the department. To identify retention programs within other federal fire departments an interview was conducted with the Chief of Fire Protection for the Air Force Materials Command (AFMC).

The interviews with the former employees indicated that they left for three reasons, the long workweek, job dissatisfaction and the lack of promotional opportunities. The literature review identified six keys to employee retention they were: recruiting, communication, training, job satisfaction, pay, and benefits.

The upper management interviews revealed that they believed personnel were leaving because of the work schedule, lack of promotional opportunities, and job dissatisfaction caused by a low call volume.

The interview with Mr. Davis revealed that there were no current retention programs within the federal fire fighting system.

The recommendations were that the department improve its recruitment policies and procedures. The RCFD should involve its members more in the daily operation of the department. The department should improve its awards program and allow its employees a chance to move laterally in the department. The upper-management of the RCFD must constantly communicate the importance to the work being done and the importance of the people doing it.

The RCFD should continue to research the subject of retention. The RCFD should form a permanent retention committee and develop an ongoing recruitment effort.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	5
BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE.....	6
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
PROCEDURES.....	12
RESULTS.....	15
DISCUSSION.....	20
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	22
REFERENCES.....	24
APPENDIX A (Former Employee Interview Sheet).....	25

INTRODUCTION

Over the last five years, twenty-one members of the Range Complex Fire Department (RDFD) have left for various reasons. The problem is that because of a reduced personnel budget the department has not been allowed to replace all the members that have left. The ensuing reduction in staffing has resulted in a fire station closure and a reduction in customer service. Operationally this reduction has resulted in increased response times, reductions of vehicle staffing and increases in overtime.

The purpose of this paper was to identify why personnel were leaving the department and to suggest ways to improve employee retention.

Descriptive and evaluative research methods were utilized to answer the following research questions:

1. Why have members left the Range Complex Fire Department?
2. In general, why do employees leave the fire organizations they work for?
3. What does the upper management team of the RCFD believe are the reasons personnel are leaving the department?
4. What retention programs are used by other federal fire departments?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The RCFD is a federally managed contractor operated fire department located in Nevada. The department provides structural fire protection, airfield fire protection, hazardous materials response and mitigation, medical response and transport, as well as a number of specialized rescue services.

Typical of most federal departments the call volume is much lower than most municipal departments, with less than 300 responses per year. What is not typical about the RCFD is the work schedule. While most municipal departments work fifty six-hour weeks, and most federal departments work seventy two-hour weeks, the RCFD works eighty-four hours per week. This long workweek is necessary due to limited transportation to and from a remote work site.

Over the last five years (1994-1998) thirty-five percent (21 of 60) assigned fire fighters of the RCFD have left the organization for various reasons. Until the last two years this was not viewed as a problem because the pool of qualified personnel seeking jobs with the organization was quite large and the cost of recruiting, training and gaining a security clearance were not considered issues because of a fairly large personnel budget. However, in the last two years the picture has changed significantly.

It has become more difficult for the RCFD to attract qualified personnel. The RCFD requires applicants to have at least four years of fire fighting experience with at least two years of that experience being in airport crash fire fighting. As a result most of the department's members are recruited from the ranks of prior military service firefighters. Over the last few years the military firefighters have been downsized significantly which has effected the recruiting process. In addition the department's personnel budget, which is not controlled by the department, has also been reduced by twenty percent.

Fire department personnel are part of a site-wide personnel pool that is controlled by the site commander. In the past when a department member left, hiring a replacement was automatic. Currently a justification must be written for each new-hire and over the past two years, eight of these requests have been denied due to lack of funds. This has resulted in staffing shortages in the department.

Initially the department was able to accept some cuts in personnel without any negative impacts, however over time more losses have had a considerable impact on the department's ability to operate effectively. The first area impacted was the staffing of the structural engines.

Engine staffing was reduced from five personnel to four and sometimes three. As a result initial response times increased due to the need for additional personnel to respond from other stations to support the first due engines. Eventually staffing was reduced to such a level that RCFD management was forced to close one of its stations.

Additional impacts brought about by staff reductions are increased overtime, including mandatory holdovers, and reduced opportunities for vacation, both of which have impacted morale among firefighters. Potentially this may lead to an even greater number of personnel leaving the department.

The topic of this paper is a direct result of a discussion about employee retention issues that were brought up during a lecture covering Chapter 7, Assessing Organizational Culture. This chapter was delivered as part of the "Executive Leadership" class presented as part of the Executive Fire Officer (EFO) program at the National Fire Academy.

The purpose of this study was to identify why the RCFD is losing personnel and to recommend potential methods to increase employee retention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature clearly indicated that there are six keys to retaining personnel. They are recruiting, communications, training, job satisfaction, pay, and benefits.

Recruiting

The effort to retain the best personnel begins with recruiting. Attracting and retaining the best people are not two different things, but are the same thing. Both require creating and maintaining a positive reputation, internally as well as externally. Employers must be honest with the recruit about the beliefs, expectations, organizational culture, demands, and opportunities within the organization. By representing the organization realistically, a department will attract those who will be content working within the culture (Marx, 1995). Denton (1992, p.47) follows this up by stating that, “the better the match between recruits and the organization the more likely you are to retain them.” Lynn (1997) believes that you must take time during the hiring process to make wise decisions. The employer must be candid about the working conditions, responsibilities, opportunities and other details to reduce the chances of making hiring mistakes. Taylor and Cosenza (1997) strengthen this thought by noting that it is imperative that companies give prospective employees a true picture of the organization, if they hope to match the personality type with the climate and culture of the organization.

The literature was clear in pointing out that if departments want to increase retention they must start with a solid recruiting process.

Communications

Carney (1998) believes that the key to employee retention is quite simple: communicate, communicate, communicate. Communication with the employees must begin early on in the relationship. He believes that the imprinting period of a new employee is probably less than two weeks. Employers must engage the employee early on by sharing how important the job they do is. Lynn (1997) follows this up by stating that early on an atmosphere of fairness and openness must be created by clearly laying out company policies.

Taylor and Consenza (1997) indicate that it is important to communicate the values of the organization to its employees in order to increase their level of consent, participation, and motivation. Lynn (1997) echoes this thought by pointing out that the vision of the organization must be shared with the employee as well as the importance the employees play in helping fulfill it.

Lack of communication may result in gaps between management's perceptions of quality employment and the employees desired and perceived quality of employment (Taylor & Consenza, 1997). There must be a common purpose and trust among employees. People want to feel as if they are a vital piece of something larger (Carney, 1998). As Denton (1992) points out, managers must make sure employees know what they should do and why it is important.

Lynn (1997) notes that communications must be a two way street to be effective. Employers must listen to what employees have to say. An atmosphere must be created in which employees feel comfortable making suggestions and trying our new ideas.

The literature revealed that communication must begin early in the employer/employee relationship. Organizational values and culture must be made clear to all employees and their importance within the organization must be continually emphasized.

Training

As was noted earlier it is important that the employee feel like a valued member of the organization. Training helps underscore this message. Training personnel is a way to show you respect them and want them to grow. The department is making an investment in the employee by offering training (Marx, 1995). Good training can de-emphasize salaries and benefits, in part by building a positive work environment and by giving employees advancement opportunities (Lynn, 1997). Lynn goes on to say that training helps strengthen employee loyalty.

Training can help revitalize personnel. For an increasing number of people, the chance to learn new skills is a significant personal goal for both the career opportunities education can provide and for the chance to do something a little different (Mendonsa, 1998).

Training emphasizes to the employee that they are valued and respected. This in turn to increased loyalty and retention.

Job Satisfaction

While an organization must be competitive in terms of compensation and benefits, it is the relationship with the supervisor that is often a crucial factor in determining whether a person stays or goes (Mendonsa, 1998). Employees want more interaction with management, more self-satisfaction on the job, more responsibility and more control over decisions affecting them. They want their work to make a difference and want to be part of something that matters (Taylor, 1997).

Departments should encourage innovation by soliciting the advice and input of their staff members, followed by responses to ideas, complaints or questions (Taylor, 1997). It is difficult to keep people on the job if they have no say in how to do it (Spragins, 1992).

People need to be recognized for their accomplishments in the workplace. In most organizations the feeling of under-recognition is the most pervasive feeling in the workplace (Mendonsa, 1998). Provide a great deal of personal and team recognition (Carney, 1998). Recognize achievements with memos, mentions in staff meetings or articles in the newspapers (Lynn, 1997).

To retain employees, departments must offer career advancement opportunities. Departments failing to offer employees career opportunities, room for advancement and enhancement of skills and knowledge may find it difficult to retain qualified employees (Taylor, 1997). Marx (1995) concludes this by pointing out that promoting from within is one of the proven methods of employee retention. Promoting from within shows that there is truly room for advancement and growth within the department.

Employee involvement, recognition, importance of work, and career advancement opportunities are all important, when dealing with employee retention.

Pay and Benefits

In general people think that money and benefits or lack thereof, are the main reasons people leave their jobs, but this is not the case. While compensation and benefits may be a key factor in the final decision-making process, a money shortage is usually not what causes people to look in the first place (Mendonsa, 1998).

Money may be the reason they give when they resign, but it's like "white noise". They are conscious of it for a while but if they are bored on the job, money alone is not going to keep them there (Branch, 1998).

Although traditional benefits such as vacation and health are still important, today's workers are also looking for more non-traditional benefits. Benefits such as flexible work ours, availability of child-care tuition assistance programs and discounts on services now top the list of desired benefits (Denton, 1992).

The literature clearly indicates while still factors, money and benefits are not as important as job satisfaction in terms of employee retention.

Summary

The purpose of this paper was to identify why personnel were leaving the RDFD and to suggest ways to improve employee retention. The literature was helpful in pointing out that employees stay or leave a department based on six key reasons, they were: Poor recruiting practices, communications, training, job satisfaction, pay, and benefits.

PROCEDURES

Literature Research Methodology

The first step in the research process was to locate any books, professional journals, and Executive Fire Officer (EFO) program research papers that related to the topic of employee retention. An initial computer search was conducted in September 1998 at the Learning Resource Center, located at the National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, Maryland. It was also useful to review the reference lists of the EFO papers, which helped locate additional references not identified by the computer. A computer search was also done in October 1998 at the Clark County

Library system in Las Vegas, Nevada and at the library of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

In an effort to broaden the search for information on the research topic Mike Davis, Chief of Fire Protection for the Air Materials Command (AMC), United States Air Force (USAF) was contacted. Mr. Davis was asked to locate any USAF or Department of Defense (DOD) studies that might have been conducted on the subject of retention among civilian federal fire fighters. Mr. Davis was unable to locate any material on this subject. In addition an Internet search was conducted to locate any information that the United States Department of Labor might have on the subject of employee retention.

Interview Methodology

There were three areas addressed by interviews during the research process. The first set of interviews was conducted utilizing the upper management of the RCFD. The purpose of these interviews was to seek upper management's opinion on why they believed personnel were leaving the RCFD. The first step was to simply ask the question, why do you believe firefighters are leaving the RCFD? This question was sent out over e-mail utilizing the department's computer system. Secondly, follow up interviews were conducted to both clarify and expand on the responses that were returned via e-mail. The personnel that were utilized for these interviews were, Fire Chief, Roland Benton, Assistant Chief, Melville Barnes, Assistant Chief, Kevin Morsey, Assistant Chief, Doug Lautner, Assistant Chief, Charles Carrier, and the functional area manager (FAM), Mark Ayers. The FAM is the senior contractor fire officer. The FAM is responsible for all contractor administrative functions. All interviews were conducted during the week of 4 January 1999.

Interviews were also conducted with personnel that had left the department in the past five years. A questionnaire was developed for this process. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix A. The areas that were identified by the literature review and by the upper management interviews as keys to why personnel leave their jobs were instrumental in the development of this questionnaire.

The first step in this process was to review personnel records to identify personnel that had left in the last five years. Of the twenty-one personnel that had left the department since 1994, six were eliminated from this study because they left due to either medical problems, retirement or death. A review of the fifteen exit interviews that were conducted on the personnel that chose to leave produced very little information as to why. As a result nine telephone interviews were conducted between December 1998 and February 1999. An attempt was made to interview at least two people from each year beginning in 1994 and ending in 1998. Each person was asked why they left. They were then asked what effect the work schedule, job satisfaction, training opportunities, promotional opportunities and pay and benefits had on their decision to leave.

Finally, Mr. Mike Davis, Chief of Fire Protection AFMC, was interviewed to find out if there were any retention programs currently in use by other federal fire departments.

Limitations

Due to difficulties locating ex-employees the researcher was only able to interview nine of the fifteen persons that were identified for interviews. This may have an effect on the outcome to the research paper.

The only literature available about retention issues in the fire service dealt with volunteer departments. These articles were not germane to retention issues in the paid fire service. As a result the literature had to be conducted using business books and periodicals.

The six-month time constraint also limited the amount of research that could be conducted on the subject. Furthermore, the researcher had to accept, with no way to double check, that all the answers provided by the respondents during the telephone interviews were truthful.

RESULTS

As a result of the research effort, this section presents specific answers to each of the original research questions.

Answers to Research Questions

1. Why have members left the Range Complex Fire Department?

Nine telephone interviews were conducted in an effort to answer this question. The first question asked was, what was the main reason you left the RCFD? Fifty six percent (5 of 9) of the respondents said that the work schedule was the main reason for leaving the department. Time away from families and the family's inability to visit them at work were the main reasons for dissatisfaction with the schedule. Twenty two percent of those interviewed (2 of 9) left because of the lack of emergency calls. Ten percent (1 of 9) said they left because of disappointment with management. "Job

security” was the reason why twenty two percent (2 of 9) gave for leaving. The two respondents felt because the contract they work under is re-bid every five years that their jobs were in jeopardy every five years. Some of the respondents had more than one reason for leaving.

Fifty six percent (5 of 9) felt that job satisfaction was a contributing factor in their decision to leave. Thirty three percent (3 of 9) were dissatisfied because of the lack of emergency responses. Ten percent (1 of 9) were dissatisfied because they felt that management did not clearly communicate the goals of the department. Ten percent (1 of 9) felt the job was boring.

All the respondents felt that the training opportunities offered by the RCFD were excellent.

As for promotional opportunities in the RCFD, forty four percent (4 of 9) felt that there was a limited opportunity for advancement. Forty four percent (4 of 9) felt that career opportunities were sufficient. Ten percent (1 of 9) did not consider advancement a factor in their decision to leave.

Seventy eight percent (7 of 9) of the respondents felt that the benefits offered were adequate. None of the respondents left because of money issues.

The interviews indicate that there were three main reasons why employees left the RCFD they were: work schedule, job satisfaction and lack of promotional opportunities.

2. In general, why do employees leave the fire organizations they work for?

A review of the literature indicated that there are six key reasons why employees leave their jobs, They are recruiting, communications, training, job satisfaction, pay, and benefits.

Recruiting is the first step in retention. An employer must be honest with the recruit about the company's or department's beliefs and culture. The better the match between the recruit and the organization the better the chance for retention (Marx, 1995).

Communications must begin early on in the relationship. Management must make it clear to the employee what the values of the organization are in order to get the employees consent, participation, and motivation (Taylor and Consenza, 1997). One of the keys to effective organizational communications is that it must be a two way street (Lynn, 1997).

Training is the third key to employee retention. According to the literature, training emphasizes to the employee that they are valued and respected and that the company is going to reward them by investing time and money in training them.

The literature indicated that job satisfaction might be the most critical factor in terms of retention. The four keys to job satisfaction are, employee-management interaction, recognition, job importance and promotional opportunities.

Employees want to feel a part of the organization. They want to have some say in how they do their job (Taylor and Consenza, 1997). The literature went on to emphasize that employers should reward and recognize employees whenever possible. Employers should also emphasize the importance of the work being done and the importance of the employee to the organization. The literature also notes that employees must be given the opportunity to advance in the organization. The final keys to retention are pay and benefits. Although money may be the reason given for resigning, it is usually not the main reason people leave (Branch, 1998). In terms of benefits employees are looking for benefits that help simplify their lives. Benefits such as child care and flexible work hours have become as important to the employee as health and retirement benefits.

The literature clearly points out that the main reasons for retention problems are recruitment, communication, promotional opportunities, job satisfaction, pay, and benefits.

3. What does the upper management team of the RCFD believe are the reasons personnel are leaving the department?

For this section of the research seven interviews were conducted. The seven persons interviewed were: Fire Chief Roland Benton; Assistant Chiefs Doug Lautner, Kevin Morsey, Charles Carrier, and Melville Barnes; and functional area manager, Mark Ayers.

Chief Benton believed that personnel were leaving due to the extended work schedule, lack of advancement opportunities, dissatisfaction with current senior officers, and the lack of a viable retirement program.

Chief Lautner felt that the long work schedule and job dissatisfaction were the reason firefighters left.

Lack of upward mobility, the long work week, and dissatisfaction with contractor upper management were the reasons given for retention problems by Chief Morsey. Chief Morsey felt the work schedule was especially difficult for firefighters with young children.

Chief Carrier pointed out that in addition to the work schedule, and limited promotional opportunities that the lack of emergency responses, and boredom, especially for younger firefighters was a key to firefighters leaving. Chief Carrier also felt that the benefits packages, especially retirement, offered by local municipal fire departments were more attractive than those currently offered by the RCFD.

Chief Barnes also felt that the work schedule and benefits offered were reasons why firefighters left.

Mark Ayers pointed out that local municipal firefighters work five fewer days per month than RCFD firefighters and make roughly the same amount of money. He felt that the shorter workweek was an attractive incentive to leave the RCFD. Mr. Ayers also felt that the lack of advancement opportunities and a pension plan also contributed to the department's retention problems.

A review of the interviews indicate that the RDFD upper management team believe that the work schedule, lack of promotional opportunities, lack of activity (job satisfaction) and limited retirement benefits are the main reasons that firefighters have left the department.

4. What retention programs are used by other federal fire departments?

To answer this question Mr. Mike Davis, Chief of Fire Protection for AFMC was contacted. Mr. Davis advised that there were no current retention programs within the federal fire fighting system. Mr. Davis explained that because manning at military fire departments is handled by a central, service wide, agency the individual fire departments do not have to concern themselves with retention.

DISCUSSION

The literature review identified six keys to employee retention they were: recruitment, communications, training, job satisfaction, pay, and benefits. However, interviews with RDFD upper-management and with past employees of the department identified only five of the six keys as issues within the department. The issues identified in the interviews were the workweek (recruitment), job satisfaction, and the lack of advancement opportunities and benefits.

Interviews with past employees pointed out that dissatisfaction with the long workweek was the main reason why people leave the RDFD. The upper-management of the RDFD also felt that the work

schedule was the main reason why firefighters left the department. The long workweek is especially difficult for firefighters with young children at home. The long workweek is a fact of life within the RCFD and is not likely to change. The issue of the workweek must be addressed during recruitment. The department must be honest with the recruit about the beliefs, expectations, organizational culture, demands and opportunities within the organization. By representing the organization realistically, the department will attract those who will be content working within the culture (Marx, 1995).

Both the past employee and upper-management interviews indicated that job satisfaction was a factor in employee retention. In both cases the respondents felt that the lack of activity was the cause to the dissatisfaction. This is not an unusual situation especially among the young firefighters who want to test their training and skills. As Marx (1995) points out if employees are bored with their job they will not stay. This is another issue that should be addressed during recruitment. Potential employees should be given a clear picture of the type and amount of responses they will encounter when they join the department.

The lack of promotional opportunities was another issue that both sets of interviewees agreed was a retention issue. The lack of promotional opportunities is caused by two factors; the fact that the department is small and that most of the officer positions are currently held by fairly young members. Employees must feel like they have an opportunity to advance. Promoting from within is one of the proven methods of employee retention. It shows that there is room for advancement and growth within the department (Marx, 1995). Firefighters tend to become de-motivated if they can see that no matter how hard they work to improve themselves and the department there is little chance that they will be promoted. If they cannot advance within the current environment they will leave for a department that offers more opportunities to exceed.

Four to the seven managers of the RCFD felt that benefits were a key reason why members were leaving the department, however, none of the past members interviewed mentioned benefits as a motivator to leave. The RCFD upper-management felt that an age 55-retirement plan was the “key” benefit. The past employees felt that the department benefits were more than adequate. This indicates that upper-management is not in completely in touch with what the issues are within the department concerning member retention. It should be noted that all the members that left the RCFD left for lower paying jobs. As Branch (1998) points out, if employees are not happy with their jobs, money alone is not going to keep them there.

If the RCFD is going to solve its retention problem it must address the issues of recruitment, job satisfaction, and promotional opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The RCFD must improve its recruitment policies and procedures. There should be no doubt in each new recruit’s mind as to what he or she is signing up for. The work schedule, the workload and the career opportunities should be clearly stated and understood. This will help eliminate any disappointment when new members begin work.

To help offset the lack of emergency responses the department should involve its employees in the daily operation of the department. Department members should have more say in how they do their job. This can be accomplished through the instituting of training, safety, apparatus committees and quality of work circles. This will give the members a sense of buy-in and will help make them feel they are more a part of the department.

The department should increase and improve its awards program. Just because there may be no promotions available does not mean that you cannot reward an employee for a job well done. These rewards can be in the form of money, gifts, plaques and memos. If there is no room for upward mobility then move the employees laterally. If an employee is working in operations move him to fire prevention or training for a while. This will help him get a better overall view of the department and hopefully stimulate his interest. Stretch the members by giving them multiple assignments (Branch, 1998).

Upper-management must constantly communicate the importance of the work being done and the importance of the people doing it.

The fire department should conduct further research on the subject of retention. The RCFD should also form a permanent retention committee to constantly monitor and advise management on retention issues.

The RCFD should develop and ongoing recruitment effort in order to maintain a larger talent pool from which to select future employees.

REFERENCES

Branch, Shelly (1998, November). The new economy: You hire 'em. But can you keep 'em? *Fortune*, 247.

Carney, Karen (1998, November). How businesses can reduce high employee turnover. *Inc*, 47.

Denton, D. Keith (1992). *Recruitment, retention, and employee relations*. West Westport, CT: Quorum

Lynn, Jacquelyn (1997). Hard to hold: Conquer the tight labor market by retaining valuable workers. *Entrepreneur*, 34.

Marx, Mary (1995, December). Keeping your best employees. *Journal of Property Management*, 26-29.

Mendonsa, Robert (1998, January). Keeping who you want to keep: Retaining the best people. *Supervision*, 10-12

Spragins, Ellen E. (1992, November). How to retain key employees. *Inc.*, 36

Taylor, Susan L. & Cosenza, Robert M. (1997, December). Internal marketing can reduce employee turnover. *Supervision*, 3-5

Appendix A
Former Employee Interview Sheet

Former Employee Interview Sheet

1. What was the main reason you left the RCFD?
2. Did any of the following issues influence your decision to leave?
 - A. Work schedule
 - B. Job satisfaction
 - C. Training opportunities
 - D. Promotional opportunities
 - E. Pay and benefits